The Relationship between Religious Symbols and Intergroup Attitudes among Majority Group Members

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Abstract.
Negative intergroup attitudes cause serious social problems in many societies throughout the world. It seems that the negative consequences for out-group members stem from a combination of two contrasting processes, in-group preference and out-group derogation. As research has progressed, a growing interest has been shown in understanding the emergence of negative out-group attitudes while focusing on variables such as intergroup threat, contact between groups, social norms and religion. This study investigated the influence of exposure to religious concepts on prejudices and threat perceptions of Jewish majority members towards Arab minority members in Israel. The aim of the study was to examine whether evoking religious content influenced out-group attitudes and perceived threat, and whether religiosity would moderate the effects. Participants completed a word search puzzle that served as a supraliminal priming task, and then filled questionnaires measuring their out-group attitudes and threat perceptions. It seems that supraliminal exposure to religious content does not have an impact on attitudes of a majority group towards a religious minority out-group possibly due to social desirability effects. Although this is a preliminary investigation, the results of this study highlight the contribution of religious content to intergroup attitudes formation for majority group members toward minority members.

Keywords: out-group attitudes, prejudice, religious, Israel, threat, minority/majority

1. Introduction

When do majority groups endorse negative attitudes toward religious minority members, and what factors are involved in these perceptions? Research has found complex relationships between religious measures and inter-group attitudes (Bohman, & Hjerm, 2014). Findings indicate that religious beliefs may be a fertile ground for growing motivations and reasons for reinforcement of prejudicial stereotypes, violent conflicts and social suppression of religious out-groups (e.g. Ramsay et al., 2014). Yet, more empirical research is needed to understand the social world of various minorities, particularly in their interactions with out-group members.

The aim of this research is to examine how exposure to religious symbols affects majority attitudes towards minority members. Focusing on the attitudes of majority members stems from the mixed findings among western majority group members showing that a multicultural context promotes out-group ethnic tolerance but also lowers acceptance of minority ethnic groups (e.g. Deaux & Verkuyten, 2014). Within an Israeli multicultural context the attitudes of the Jewish majority towards Arab minority groups should be investigated more thoroughly

due to the complexity and challenges that stem from variety of cultures and religions (Shamoa-Nir, 2014).

1.1 Priming religious content

The present research uses supraliminal exposure in order to investigate the influence of conscious religious content on intergroup attitudes. Priming refers to an increased sensitivity to certain stimuli due to prior exposure to them or to other stimuli associated with them. It has been shown that, on the one hand, priming of religious concepts induced prosaically behavior (Pérez et. al.,, 2008; Pichon et al., 2007), however on the other hand, following priming of in-group Christian or Buddhist religious concepts there were significantly more prejudice and negative emotions towards Afro-Americans or other cultural minority out-groups, compared to conditions in which neutral concepts were primed (Ramsay et al., 2014).

Several recent studies have linked religion content and intergroup relations (Johnson et al., 2012; Ramsay et al., 2014; Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2013; Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2015; Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2018; Shamoa-Nir, 2019; Shamoa-Nir & Razpurker-Apfeld, 2019), claiming that evoking religious content contributes to negative attitudes towards the out-group. However, these findings raise some open issues which deserve further investigation and will be addressed in the current research. First, in some studies the participants' awareness of religious content may have contaminated the process thereby producing social desirability effects. Second, in different studies participants were exposed to different content (e.g. in-group or out-group religious symbols). Third, different effects may occur when testing the exposure to religious content on minority participants and majority participants.

It should be noted that although negative attitudes to out-groups have been positively correlated with religiosity, religious priming effects have been reported to remain after controlling for religiosity (Johnson et al., 2012). Hence, in the present study too, religiosity was controlled. Moreover, several studies highlight the need to distinguish between out-group and in-group contents (Johnson, et al., 2012; Ramsay et al., 2014; Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2015). Thus, this study uses two types of religious priming, in-group or out-group religious symbols.

1.2 Intergroup attitudes and Threat Perceptions

Our social judgment and intergroup attitudes sometimes lead to biases in the perception of similarities and differences between members of in-groups and out-groups. In particular, people in conflict relations, tend to develop overly-negative images towards the out-group (De Dreu et al., 1995), and their decisions and actions can be biased, even consciously. In addition, several moderating conditions were found in studying inter-group attitudes: national context (Guimond et al., 2014), level of intergroup conflict (Correll et al., 2008), intergroup anxiety (Stephan, 2014), and in-group identification (Morrison et al., 2010).

This research will focus on the association between threat perceptions and out-group attitudes. Originating from the integrated threat theory (Stephan et al., 2009), prejudices stem from realistic threat, symbolic threat, interpersonal threat (inter-group anxiety), and stereotypes (Stephan & Renfro, 2002). Realistic threats refer to threat to the physical welfare and resources of the in-group, while symbolic threats refer to threat to the in-group's system of values and beliefs. Relating to the conflict between Jews and Arabs living in Israel, Stephan and colleagues (2009) have illustrated that for Jews, realistic threat may refer to

terrorism, and for Arabs – being civilian casualties. Symbolic threats involve feelings of being dishonored. Interpersonal threat, known also as intergroup anxiety (Stephan & Renfro, 2002), stems from in-group members' fear of encounters with the out-group which might provoke rejection, feelings of inferiority and fear of exploitation and degradation.

The above four sources of prejudice do not necessarily have similar psychological implications. For example, it has been found that symbolic and realistic threats have differential predictive value, since stereotypes and symbolic threats, but not realistic threats, predicted prejudice towards Muslims in the Netherlands (Velasco et al., 2008). Stephan (2014) focused on intergroup anxiety and argued that it can activate negative out-group cognitions including negative attitudes and negative beliefs about the out-group. Indeed, many studies showed that intergroup anxiety was associated with negative out-group attitudes (for review see, Riek et al., 2006). However, not much is known about the relationship between intergroup threat perceptions and accessibility to religious content by indirect exposure to them. In this study we examined the Jewish group in Israel which is the dominant majority. According to Stephan and Renfro (2002), the dominant group may experience an increased sense of threat from the out-group, due to a threat to its power and privileges. In accordance, we hypothesized that exposure to out-group religious concepts should increase perceived realistic and symbolic threats experienced by Jewish group (*Hypothesis 1A*).

Moreover, it is important to examine whether religious priming affects the behavioral responses towards out-group members since studies have indicated that intergroup anxiety has an impact on a variety of behaviors (for review see, Stephan, 2014). Intergroup contact, which included meetings and social interactions, was suggested as a way to reduce perceived threats and undermine stereotypes and negative behaviors (for a meta-analytical review, see Pettigrew & Tropp, 2008). Therefore, in light of these findings, we hypothesized that the priming effects should be reflected in the dimensions of prejudice and intergroup anxiety towards the out-group (*Hypothesis 1B*).

In summary, this study examined whether evoking religious content influenced out-group attitudes and perceived threat, and whether religiosity would moderate the effects. However, it is important to note that this is a preliminary exploration of the relationships between the variables. Participants completed a word search puzzle that served as a supraliminal priming task, and then filled questionnaires measuring their out-group attitudes, behavioral intentions and threat perceptions.

2. Method

2.1 Participants

Seventy Israeli Jewish undergraduate college students were recruited to participate in the experiment. There were 61 women and 7 men. Two participants did not provide information about their gender. The age of the participants ranged between 19 to 51 years (M = 28, SD = 8.7). The mean reported religiosity of the participants was 6.6 (SD = 3.4) on a 1 (non-religious) to 10 (religious) scale.

2.2 Materials and Measures

Word Search Puzzle. The word search puzzle served as the supraliminal priming task. We used a Hebrew version presenting Jewish, Islamic and neutral concepts (Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2015), based on various English versions (priming general concepts: Bargh et

al., 2001; priming neutral and positive religious concepts: Pichon et al., 2007). Each puzzle consisted of 3 critical words and 4 filler words. The task was to mark 7 target words specified in a list. These words were embedded in a 9X12 matrix of letters. They could appear from right to left, left to right, up to down or down to up or diagonally to all directions. The filler words always included the words flower-pot, telephone, rice and train. The critical words in the Jewish priming condition included: yarmulke, mezuzah and Torah; the critical words in the Islamic priming condition included: veil, Koran and mosque. In the Neutral priming condition pencil-box, table and computer were added. In Hebrew each of the critical words in one condition had a word that matched in length in the other conditions. The locations of the filler and critical words were always the same.

Prejudicial Attitudes. We used a Hebrew adaptation of an existing prejudice measure (Stephan et al., 1999; Tur-Kaspa & Schwarzwald, 2003). The questionnaire included 14 items describing emotional evaluations such as hostility, hatred and rejection, towards the Muslim group. Participants had to indicate the degree to which they felt each particular evaluation towards Muslims on a 1 (very much) to 10 (not at all) scale. After 8 items were reversed scored, an averaged prejudicial score was calculated per participant, reflecting negativity of attitudes. The questionnaire resulted in an excellent Cronbach alpha of .904.

Realistic Threats. Based on the Stephan's et al.'s questionnaire (1999) and its Hebrew version (Tur-Kaspa & Schwarzwald, 2003), we measured realistic threat perceived by Jews from their Muslim out-group. The questionnaire included 13 statements involving economics, politics, welfare services and social security services: For example, "The Muslims endanger the existence of the Jews in the country", "The standard of living of Jews is damaged because of the Muslims". Participants indicated the extent to which they agreed with such statements on a 1 to 10 scale, from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. The Cronbach alpha was .97, indicating an excellent internal reliability.

Symbolic Threat. Based on previous measures used with other populations (Stephan et al., 1999; Tur-Kaspa & Schwarzwald, 2003), this questionnaire included 13 statements assessing a difference in values and beliefs between Jews and Muslims. For example: "The family values of Jews and Muslims are very similar", "The Muslim lifestyle damages the values of tradition as perceived by Jews". Extent of agreement was evaluated on a scale from 1 (strongly disagree) to 10 (strongly agree). The items resulted in excellent Cronbach alpha of .916.

Intergroup Anxiety. This questionnaire was based on an existing Hebrew translation (Tur-Kaspa & Schwarzwald, 2003), which presented 13 emotions, such as embarrassment, anxiety and humiliation. Participants had to indicate the extent to which they experienced such emotions in contact with the Muslim out-group, using 10-point scales. The reliability of the questionnaire was high (Cronbach alpha = .864). For all threat measures, higher averaged values indicated higher threat.

2.3 Procedure

Participants were randomly assigned to priming of Jewish, Islamic or neutral concepts (*N* = 24, *N* = 23, *N* = 23, respectively). Each participant completed one of the three types of the puzzles and then filled the questionnaires considering Muslims as out-group. The experiment was run individually and participants provided details about their age, sex and religiosity.

3. Results

Priming effects were explored separately for each set of attitudes. The results are plotted in Figure 1.

Prejudice. In the following ANCOVA, there was no effect of the type of priming on prejudice [$F < 1$], after controlling for religiosity, which was found to be a significant covariate [$F (1,65) = 55.651, MSE = 104.144, p < .0009, \eta^2 = .46$]. Across the three priming conditions it was found that the more religious the Jewish participant was, the more reported prejudice emerged ($r = .702$).

Realistic, Symbolic and Interpersonal Threat Perception Measures. To examine the effects of the priming manipulation on the combined measure of threat perception while controlling for religiosity, a one-way multivariate analysis of covariance (MANCOVA) was performed. Priming had no effect on threat perception [*Hotelling's Trace = .052, F < 1*]. The religiosity covariate was significantly related to threat perception [*Hotelling's Trace = .052, F(3,63) = 13.727, p < .0009*, $\eta_p^2 = .395$]. Further analyses indicated that all three types of threats were positively correlated with religiosity across all priming conditions – the more religious the person was, the higher were the threat perceptions [for realistic threat, $r = .619, p < .0009$; for symbolic threat, $r = .626, p < .0009$; for intergroup anxiety, $r = .384, p < .002$].

Figure 1: Attitudes towards Muslims and perceived threats as a function of religious priming (Jewish – own religion / Islamic – the "other" religion / neutral), after controlling for religiosity. Panel A refers to the measures of prejudice and social distance. Panel B refers to reported threat perceptions. Priming was supraliminal. Higher mean measures represent more threats or negative attitudes. Error bars represent standard errors. Dashed line represents scale midpoint above which attitudes tend to be more negative and perceived threats are higher.
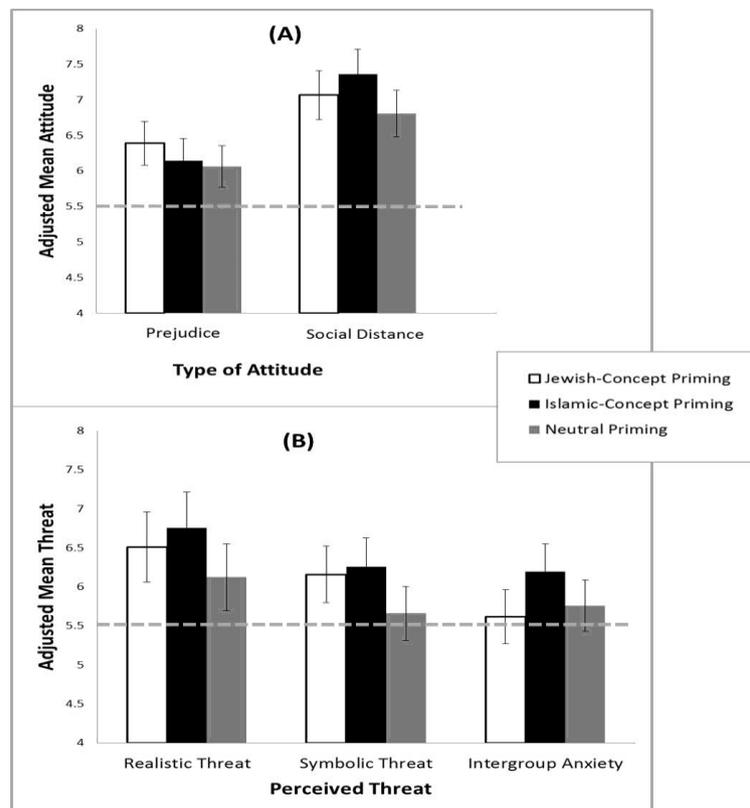
5.   Discussion

The present study examined whether evoking religious content influenced out-group attitudes and perceived threat among majority group members. Participants completed a word search puzzle that served as a supraliminal priming task, and then filled questionnaires measuring their out-group attitudes, behavioral intentions and threat perceptions. The findings show that supraliminal exposure to religious content does not have an impact on attitudes of a majority group towards a religious minority.

Even though this priming technique has demonstrated robust priming effects in previous experiments with Muslim participants (e.g. Razpurker-Apfeld & Shamoa-Nir, 2015), it seems that supraliminal exposure to religious content does not have an impact on attitudes of a majority group towards a religious minority out-group possibly due to social desirability effects. Being aware of the religious concepts, the Jewish participants did not allow their out-group attitudes to be revealed, and thus we did not find a difference between neutral and religious priming. It seems that in order to bypass social desirability effects, the religious concepts should be presented outside of conscious awareness. Thus, participants' motivation to control attitudes may be reduced.

5.1   Limitations and future research

Due to the nature of this research, which is a preliminary study, there are some limitations worth noting. First, since the possibility that participants were aware of the research manipulation; subliminal priming should be tested, in order to decrease social desirability effects. For example, using Wittenbrink et al.'s concept priming procedure (Wittenbrink et al., 2001), may automatically elicit attitudes that are influenced by religious content.

Second, we examined Jewish participants studying in a multicultural college, which has been recognized to be a challenging social context (Shamoa-Nir, 2014). Although we have examined participants under a religious intergroup conflict in order to study the process of evoking religious cognitive schema, it should be acknowledged that further research involving other religious groups could possibly lead to different outcomes, especially, since differential priming effects were reported for various religious groups drawn from the same multicultural setting (Shamoa-Nir & Razpurker-Apfeld, 2013).

A future research should examine the Muslims' attitudes. Moreover, while examining the effects of priming religious symbols, the situational status should also be investigated, namely, the quality of contact between groups, and the effect of the group's personal experience and knowledge of out-groups or the relative status.

5.   Conclusion

Taken together, our results strengthen the view that religious content is important in evoking threat perceptions in group relations. Although we have not found that priming of religious concepts affect intergroup attitudes, the importance of exploring different conditions of exposure to religious content was emphasized. In particular, our findings may help to build a justification for continuing developing the theoretical framing to conceptualize religious cognition in the field of social psychology. Furthermore, there is an encouraging start for those who are concerned with the dyadic influence of relations between members of different religious groups on their mutual attitudes.

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